

Fishtales
Saturday, September 29, 2012
Working Waterfront Festival

Interviewer – Markham Starr

Interviewee – Len Tchorz

Interviewee – Jimmy Dwyer (makes some comments during interview)

MS Now if you could tell me your name

LT My name is Len Tchorz and I fished for 35 years after that I went tug boatin' for a couple of years then I went down the Steamship Authority for seven years so I've been around the water a little bit. And I'll get to my second trip I made and how I got into it was my father was fishing and I had been down in Florida, supposedly going to college on the GI bill. But I got side tracked and I ended up back here. I got a job on a boat with my father and the second trip I made we were headed out. The name of the boat was the MARMACKS. And the, it was, the fog was so thick you couldn't see 10 feet. So we left New Bedford, we didn't have radar in those days, so we left New Bedford and we, the next morning around 4 o'clock there was, in the fog there was the third largest liner in the world at that time, the Nieuw Amsterdam. So she was going along and we hit her in the side. And she scraped off the whole top part of our bow. The water came rushing in and naturally the bow went down a little so we all managed to get back up on deck and after about a half an hour the fog started to lift a little bit. And you could see that Nieuw Amsterdam, it looked like a mountain, you know. And so they sent down a launch to ask us what we wanted to do. They wanted us to abandon ship. But we didn't wanna go. So we decided if we shovel, we had thirty ton of ice on board, if we shovel that out that would have brought the bow back up which it did. And it was flat calm anyway. So the skipper says we're not leaving the boat we're gonna go back to New Bedford. They said well, we advise you to come aboard, he said, we're headed for New Jersey. We got a thousand passengers and we got a schedule. So we didn't go anyways so they made a big circle around us and went back to the ship. By this time, the whole deck was lined up with people taking pictures. So the ship got going, made a big circle around us and then he left. And we got back to New Bedford, fortunately with no casualties, but that was my second trip.

One thing I was gonna bring up, I don't know you probably heard it before, it's about the name of some of these guys back when I was young, I happen to have them on me: Stonehorse Gus was one of 'em. Now there was Stonehorse Lightship over here on the shoals, maybe that's where it was named from. There was Big Ear Mike. That's obvious. Mickey Mouse, and I'm not talking about Disney Land you know. Blondie John. Sweet Pea was one of the only black guys in the fleet. But what a worker and what a nice man he was. And he was, remember him, Jim [talking to another old timer]? He was always dressed up nice you know, sharp. Then there was Whalem Day. Then there was also Crooked Nick Leo, but they also called him Hard to Port. Oh you got 'em. Then there was Red Tom, One Punch Olsen and also he was known as Burn 'Em Up Olsen, 'cause he used to go cook. But One Punch came, he weighed about a hundred pounds. And One

Punch and he was gone. Atlantic City John and Atlantic City Bill, Brooklyn Bill, Billy the Kid, I think he got that from the movie. But he always brought a gun aboard which wasn't great. And there was Fingers, which he had lost fingers so that's how he got that name. Then there was a fellow that lost four toes, they called him Step and a Half. Sadie Benham (?), do you remember him Jim? Portland Bill, Hound Dog, Old Hound Dog, he was from the state of Maine. He always had a pipe. And he was always arguing with this Crab MacDonald who was another state of Mainer. So they were headed out and 'course Crab was always heckling him and everything else so he said you know now we're going down the channel here, you're goin' southwest, the tide's comin' southwest, and here comes a big freighter down there. Now what are you gonna do Hound Dog. He says "Well, tell you what I'm gonna do, I'm a go down forward and have a cup of coffee." Then there was Laughin' Mike, Galloping Gus, Scar Face Jack, Snuffy Smith, Shoe Shine Johnny was a young, he started off young shining shoes around the dock, eventually went fishin' but the name never left him. Andy Gump, Oscar the Fin and Champagne John. But you know these guys here, you never knew their real names. So if anybody comes up to you, they say "You know, Jimmy Dwyer?" You say, "No." They say, "You know Jimmy the Turtle" "Oh yeah, I know him" You know what I mean? Stuff like that so. That's all I got.

MS What was your worst day at sea?

LT Well let me see... there's the Senat[or]. Elizabeth, Elizabeth Warren. [Senatorial candidate Elizabeth Warren was walking around at the event]. Oh worst day at sea...there was a few of them. Well, one of my worst days at sea was, we were fishing down off of Long Island. And I don't know [if it] was a mechanical failure or what. Now you know how big them scallop drags are? Well I was trying to get the hook out of this chain and whoever was up there, whether it was mechanical or not payin' attention, the drag dropped on my foot. And I mean crushed all my toes. So the Coast Guard had to come out from Shinnecock off Long Island to come and get me. So when they came alongside now we're both goin' like this here, the Coast Guard boat...and I'm standing on the rail and the guy says "Jump!" I only got one leg that's any good, you know. But anyway, I got aboard and it was one of them Coast Guard vessels that can go under the water so they put me in the back with this young Coast Guard guy, so we're headed for shore. Now we're like rolling, so I'm lookin' at this Coast Guard kid and he's startin' to get greener and greener. I said "Are you alright?" He says "Well, I'm just back after thirty days leave." I said "Well, let me tell you, if you get sick, don't puke on me, because I, I got enough problems." So we got in there and I was in the hospital, anyway everything worked out well. That's about what I got. I got a couple of more, but I don't remember

JD Why don't you keep going, Georgie Edwards, 1967, [inaudible]

LT Was I, I wasn't with him was I?

JD But don't you remember that, when they came in, they were driftin' for so many days?

LT Yeah my father was on that boat.

JD That's right, that's why I'm sayin'

LT Yeah my father was, they were considered missing. And they broke down, they drifted forever and I think they ended up say from off Nantucket, way the heck down off Delaware somewhere. But they found 'em anyway.

MS So that was before days of radio and

LT Well everything broke down, the electronics, and you had limited electronics at that time. You didn't have what they have now. This kid was tellin' me the other day when they're settin' out the wire now, like we used to have to mark the wires to tell how much we had out, now they can electronically, as the wire's going out, a digital display comes up and they know they can stop it, oh it's amazing. But then they, I had my day I guess.

JD They were considered lost, 1967, they were gone. I remember [inaudible] was on it. And he had a transistor radio and he heard the search was called off and about within the hour a plane was goin' over, he found them.

MS Wow

JD [inaudible]

LT About the Nellie Pat. When they were fishing down that way, they hauled up the drag there was a torpedo in it, exploded. Blew the boat to smithereens. There was only maybe one or two survivors out of eleven guys. You never know what you're gonna haul up.

MS What's the strangest thing you ever hauled up?

LT Well one thing that sticks out in my mind, we were fishing down off New York there and I we hauled up this jaw bone. So right away, I thought it was prehistoric and when we got back to New Bedford, I went down to Woods Hole to see if they could identify it. They didn't know what it was. So I says, well alright. So my wife was in Maryland, so we went down there on a visit and I said I'm gonna go to the Smithsonian see if they can tell me what this is. So I went there and, have you ever been there? Behind every exhibit there's like a door where you can go in the back where they got all these little offices with different things that they show. So this guy brought me to one place. "Whadya got?" I showed him. I said, "What is this?" He said, "It's a jaw bone of a pig!" [laughs]. Yeah. But you know maybe years ago they used to have pigs aboard, slaughter 'em and I don't know...alright guys...